



Firefighter Identity and Perception of Cancer Survivorship: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Hwa-Young Lee¹, Brissa Aranda², Dan Whu³, Gabe Dominguez⁴, Russ Osgood⁵, Michael Glynn³, Shine Chang¹

¹Department of Health Disparities, The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, Tx, USA
²Department of Epidemiology, The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, Tx, USA
³International Association of Fire Fighters, Washington, DC, USA; ⁴Houston Professional Fire Fighters Association, IAFF Local 341
⁵ Firefighter Cancer Support Network, USA



Why This Matters



Like Thor in **Avengers: Endgame**, even the strongest protectors can lose their sense of who they are and find their way back with their team.

- For firefighters, cancer can threaten more than health. It can shake their identity as rescuers.
- Identity threat* is linked to lower self-esteem and reduced performance.

Overall Goal

This project aims to

- Understand how firefighters describe themselves and cancer patients/survivors, and
- Examine how these descriptions are related.

Methods

Of 204 firefighters working in health, safety, and wellness (HSW), 63 completed open-ended questions in a needs assessment survey (July - August 2026).

Prompt: “List as many words or phrases to describe how firefighters describe 1) themselves and 2) cancer patients/survivors”

Two researchers reviewed responses to

- Identify common themes related to firefighter identity and perceptions of cancer patients/survivors, and
- Determine whether the two sets of descriptions were similar or different

References

Park CL, Zlateva I, Blank TO. Self-identity after cancer: “survivor”, “victim”, “patient”, and “person with cancer”. J Gen Intern Med. 2009 Nov;24 Suppl 2(Suppl 2):S430-5. doi: 10.1007/s11606-009-0993-x. PMID: 19838845; PMCID: PMC2763169.

Petriglieri, J. L. (2011). Under threat: Response to and the consequences of threats to individuals' identities. The Academy of Management Review, 36(4), 641–662.

Schaefer Solle, N., Legros, A., Jackson, R., Rangan, A., Beaver, C. C., Kling, H., Khan, F., Koru-Sengul, T., Penedo, F. J., Caban-Martinez, A. J., & Kobetz, E. N. (2023). Understanding Cancer Survivorship among Firefighters: A Mixed-Method Study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(1), 257. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20010257>

Results

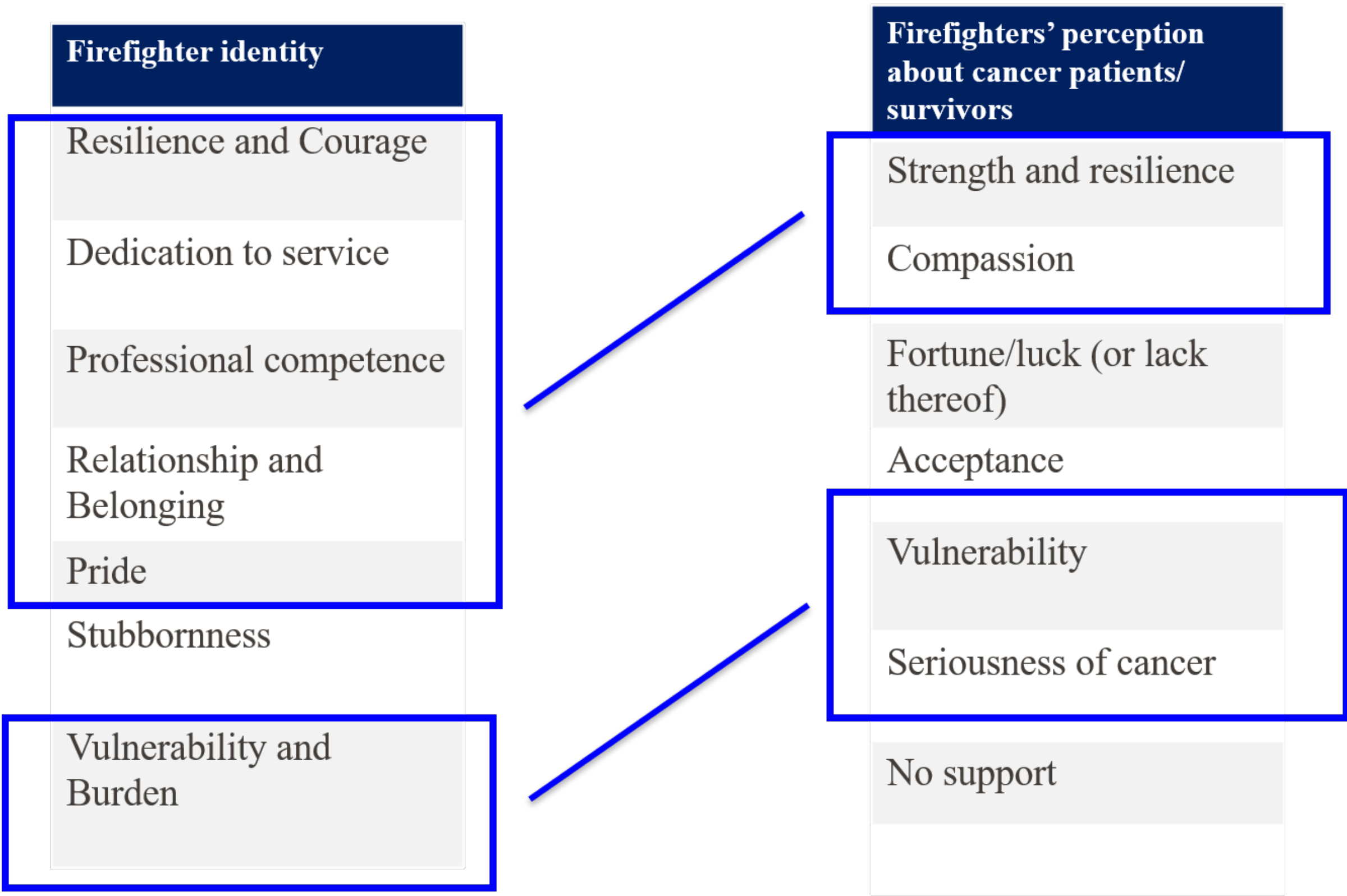
How Firefighters See Themselves

Firefighter identity	Examples
Resilience and Courage	“willing to take the sacrifice”, “strong”, “resilient”, “courageous”, “brave”
Dedication to service	“dedicated”, “committed”, “provider”, “altruistic”, “selfless”
Professional competence	“skillful”, “hard working”, “trustworthy”, “focus on results”, “analytical”
Relationship and Belonging	“family men”, “family oriented”
Pride	“honorable”, “proud”
Stubbornness	“stubborn”
Vulnerability and Burden	“tired”, “underpaid”, “fatigued”, “no support”, “no clue of the mental stress”

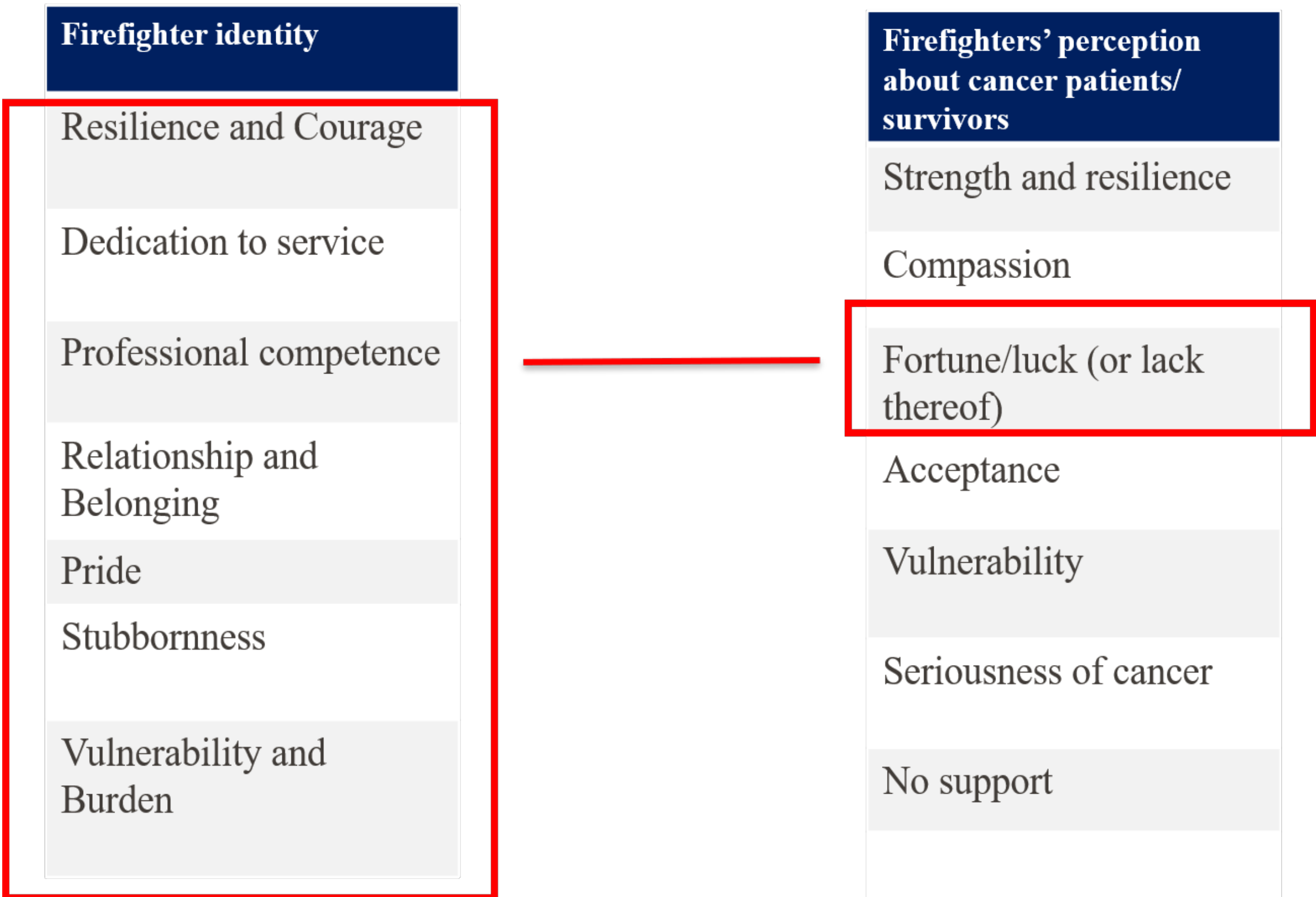
How Firefighters See People with Cancer

Firefighters’ perception about cancer patients/ survivors	Examples
Strength	“strong”, “fighters”, “courageous”, “warriors”, “survivors”, “hero”
Resilience	“resilient”, “stay in fight”, “never give up”
Compassion	“sad”, “you are loved”, “owed all the help and support”. “strong faith”
Fortune/luck (or lack thereof)	“lucky”, “fortunate”, “unlucky”, “poor/lucky bastard”
Acceptance	“I knew what I was getting into”, “inevitable”, “part of the job”
Vulnerability	“weak”, “sick”, “dying”, “emotional”, “scared”, “painfully dying”, “angry”
Seriousness of cancer	“serious”, “just a matter of time before it comes back”
No support	“it’s ignored”

When Self-Views and Survivor Views Match



A Shared View: Cancer as Luck (or lack thereof)



Early Interpretations of Findings

- Firefighters may see survivors through the lens of their own identity.** Firefighters who saw themselves as resilient and courageous tended to describe survivors as strong. Those who felt tired or burdened tended to see survivors as vulnerable and cancer as serious. Service-minded firefighters emphasized compassion and support.
- Broadly, cancer was seen as “luck”.** Regardless of how they saw themselves, many described patients/survivors as “lucky” or “unlucky.”
- “Strong” is not the whole story.** Patients/survivors were also described as “scared,” “sick,” and “ignored.”

Potential Implications

Identity Matters in Cancer: How firefighters see themselves may affect how they understand cancer and survivorship.

One message may not fit all: Cancer education and support may work better when they reflect the different ways firefighters see themselves.

“Luck” needs a closer look: Does “luck” reflect chance, the known risks of the job, or surviving cancer? Understanding what it means may help guide cancer prevention and support firefighters.